



# Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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## The Learning Edge: Working in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples



Members of Tsilhqot'in Nation rally in Vancouver in defence of Teztan Biny (Fish Lake) in 2010.

On June 21st, Canadians will be celebrating National Aboriginal Day. On the same day, the country will hear from Aboriginal people who survived residential schools, giving their testimonies at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. This juxtaposition – the denunciation of state-sanctioned racism with the affirmation of enduring cultures – is emblematic. The challenges facing Indigenous peoples in Canada, as well as in other countries, are striking: high levels of poverty, health status equivalent to that in much poorer countries, extreme levels of violence against women, and less access to quality education for children. Just as striking, however, is the fierce tenacity of communities and nations who continue to fight so they, their cultures, their languages, and their lands may survive and flourish.

Given the obstacles facing Indigenous peoples, Inter Pares is often asked about our support to Indigenous struggles. Inter Pares works with people who are struggling to maintain their lands and culture, their livelihoods, and their communities in the face of economic exploitation, environmental devastation, the excesses of “development,” or the ravages of war and civil conflict.

This means that Inter Pares often engages and shares in the struggles of Indigenous peoples. Inter Pares works around the world with such communities, and the organizations that support them, to challenge the economic and political forces that – left unchecked – destroy social and physical landscapes and prevent people from transforming the chronic social and economic exclusion they face. An important part of our support is directed towards Indigenous peoples’ reclamation of their culture, which has always been central to efforts to overcome their oppression.

In Bangladesh, for instance, Inter Pares has been collaborating with Nijera Kori for over thirty years. Among the poorest in Bangladesh, the Indigenous peoples with whom Nijera Kori works are organizing themselves to access the resources of their traditional forested territories, from which they could sustainably gain their living. On the India-Burma border, the Chin Human Rights Organization supports Indigenous peoples from Chin State to document and denounce human rights abuses, enhancing their capacity to speak against injustice on their own behalf. Across the Americas, among the communities affected by armed conflict that Inter Pares and Project Counselling Service accompany, Indigenous people are at the forefront of those working for justice and peace.

And in Canada, Indigenous people are colleagues within many of the coalitions in which we work, bringing indispensable knowledge and perspectives that enhance our collective work to transform the structures of oppression and inequality that still leave far too many isolated and excluded. Over the years, Inter Pares has organized many learning exchanges between Aboriginal groups in Canada and domestic and international counterparts facing similar challenges, so that they might learn from each other’s strategies and build relationships of mutual support.

In this *Bulletin*, you’ll read about the Indigenous leaders who participated with us in developing a People’s Food Policy for Canada. During that process, the group often arrived at what Dawn Morrison, a Shuswap leader from British Columbia, called a “learning edge” – where one leaves familiar territory, and begins to consider other ways of seeing the world and his or her place in it. There are times when a step forward means giving up what each of us has always understood as true; at these moments – when we leave what we know – we see the world and ourselves anew. When we engage with others in common cause for social justice, we must be open to finding those moments, because it is only through such experiences that we discover ways forward that respect the needs, aspirations, and perspectives of all.

Whether bringing light to hidden realities, proposing ways to ensure healthy food for all, or collaborating to address the social and environmental impacts of irresponsible mining, this *Bulletin* tells stories about some of the innumerable ways Indigenous people are part of making the world better for everyone. By working together, we can seek out – and step across – the “learning edge.”

## A Say in Their Future

In the north-eastern Indian state of Mizoram, the city of Aizawl seems to be a vertical optical illusion, built on the sides of steep hills that form much of the terrain of this region. This same hilly terrain across the India-Burma border is Chin State, home to a collection of Indigenous peoples which, while referred to collectively as *Chin*, speak various languages and have distinct cultures. Unfortunately, part of what unifies them is the harsh treatment they receive at the hands of the military. Successive military regimes in Burma have vilified ethnic minority groups as backward, rebels or bandits. Currently, Mizoram is home to over 60,000 refugees who have fled human rights abuses in Chin State.

Chin State is rich in natural resources, with large hydro-electric potential, significant mineral and natural gas deposits, and forests. As in other ethnic states of Burma, there is a rush by the Burmese regime to develop these resources. New projects are frequently announced: a dam here, a mine there, a new large-scale agricultural plantation granted to a foreign corporation. The Chin, who have lived on the land for thousands of years, often learn about these projects when the army shows up, ordering them to leave to make way for the reservoir or the mine. Compensation for the loss of their land and livelihoods is simply not part of the project plan.

Inter Pares has been supporting groups like the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) for over fifteen years, helping to build their capacity to document and denounce human rights abuses. As a member of the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, CHRO has also improved its skills researching resource development projects and their impact on people, and assisting villagers in demanding that their interests be

taken into account. The Kaladan River Project, for instance, will connect the Indian city of Kolkata to Mizoram through Chin State, and has the potential to bring huge economic benefits to India. Large parts of this project, however, are being built on confiscated land with forced labour by Chin villagers. CHRO is coordinating with other Burmese groups, not to stop the project but rather to eliminate the abuses and ensure concrete benefits for the Chin people.

While recent political shifts in Burma have brought hope for positive change, marginalized ethnic groups like the Chin must be given a say in their future if this change is to be just, sustainable, and bring lasting peace to the country. ✂



DAVID BRUER



## Food Secure Canada: Weaving a (Food) Web of Solidarity

In April 2011, Inter Pares helped launch *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*. The report was the culmination of a massive civic inquiry into the food system. In all, over 3,500 people from across the country took part, generating the most comprehensive analysis of the Canadian food system thus far, and outlining clear policies for fostering a more just and ecological society. Food Secure Canada, an increasingly strong and influential voice for the food movement, is committed to turning the People's Food Policy into reality.

At the heart of the People's Food Policy is the wisdom of Indigenous community leaders from across Canada.

Throughout the three-year process, these leaders – along with activists from different regions, sectors, and cultures – worked to find common ground and to iron out a collective vision for advancing food sovereignty in Canada. Overcoming differences and working in common cause was essential, as the reality is stark and there is urgency to act.

In urban areas, food bank use is at an all-time high. At the same time, in Canada's North, the exorbitant price for nutritious food, combined with cheap junk food, is contributing to malnutrition, with epidemic proportions of childhood obesity and diabetes. While we speak of "food deserts" in urban centres, oil and mineral development in

## Saving Teztan Biny, Redux

Ramsey calls it the Zombie Mine project. “No matter how often you kill it, it keeps on coming back – and always worse than before.” Ramsey Hart is the Canadian Program Coordinator for MiningWatch Canada, and the mine in question is the Prosperity Mine project, in the far north of British Columbia. In coordination with the Tsilhqot’in First Nation, Ramsey was just finishing up MiningWatch’s comments on the terms of reference for the upcoming Project Review Panel for the Prosperity Mine – for the second time.

What’s worse, Ramsey said, is that “the Tsilhqot’in people, after months of grueling work, thinking that they had finally been heard by the Canadian government, now have to go through the whole process again. This is just not right.”

In July 2010, after months of technical reviews and detailed submissions by the Tsilhqot’in Nation, MiningWatch Canada and other organizations, a federal review panel issued what then-Federal Minister of the Environment Jim Prentice called a “scathing” report – “probably the most damning I have ever read.”

With reason. Fish Lake – Teztan Biny in the Tsilhqot’in language – along with its watershed is a remarkably productive trout fishery. It is an important economic, spiritual, and cultural area for the Tsilhqot’in, and habitat for at-risk grizzlies. The project would have drained Teztan Biny and turned the upper watershed into a toxic tailings pond, causing devastating and irreparable damage to the Tsilhqot’in, the area’s fish stocks and the grizzly.

But barely one year later, not only did the company resubmit a bid for a “New” Prosperity Mine, the federal government agreed to put it through the review process again. While the company claims this is a new project, Ramsey notes that the first bid included substantially the same idea as an alternative, and both the company and the federal panel agreed that it would result in even greater long-term risk than the primary proposal.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Ramsey points out that there are many examples of positive collaboration between

First Nations and mining companies. “The Tsilhqot’in are not against resource development. They are against destructive and irresponsible mining.” Rather than waste time and resources in repetitive abuses of process, they want to develop more acceptable and sustainable economic options.

Ramsey, and MiningWatch, will continue to collaborate with the Tsilhqot’in and other First Peoples in their struggle to protect their livelihoods and steward the land and water to the benefit of all. As it has since it helped found MiningWatch over a decade ago, Inter Pares will continue to support efforts to promote permanent change in the Canadian government’s relationship with Aboriginal peoples, and the way environmental and socio-economic development choices are made in Canada. ✂



Members of the Xení Gwet’in community of the Tsilhqot’in Nation taken by Ramsey Hart out on Teztan Biny.

Inter Pares is a proud co-founder and member of MiningWatch Canada. In addition to program collaboration and providing financial support, Inter Pares staff member Jean Symes sits on MiningWatch’s Board of Directors, providing organizational, governance, and fundraising assistance.

the North are leading to “wildlife deserts” that threaten the ability of communities to feed themselves through fishing, hunting and harvesting – an essential part of life and culture for Northern Canadians.

A paradigm shift is needed. For Indigenous peoples, food is part of a web of relationships with the natural world that nurtures cultures and communities. As an elder from the Anishinaabe community states in the People’s Food Policy: “The recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine; not only for the body, but for the soul, for the spiritual connection to history, ancestors, and the land.” The

values and knowledge of Indigenous peoples are key to helping humanity overcome the challenges we face today and plan for tomorrow.

This past January, Inter Pares staff member Eric Charette was elected Chair of Food Secure Canada. Over the coming years, Inter Pares will be lending significant support to Food Secure Canada, an organization that is leading the way in creating the space for collective learning and action among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to bring about food sovereignty. ✂

Learn more about Indigenous food sovereignty:  
[www.foodsecurecanada.org/indigenous-circle](http://www.foodsecurecanada.org/indigenous-circle)

## A Time for Wise Decisions



BILL FAIRBAIRN

New Year ceremony at the Mayan ruins of Zacaleu, Huehuetenango.

Inter Pares staff member Bill Fairbairn was recently in Guatemala where, together with our counterpart Project Counselling Service, he attended a traditional ceremony to mark the beginning of the Mayan New Year. 2012 is an important year for the Mayans, as it represents the end of a 5,125-year cycle. While Hollywood has depicted the Mayan prophecy as an apocalyptic nightmare, for the Mayan spiritual guide who led the ceremony, the beginning of this new year signifies a rebirth and time of wisdom, intelligence, and movement. Moreover, it is a time to take wise decisions. As one sun dies and a new one is born – something the Mayan calendar predicts will happen in December 2012 – it is a time of new possibilities. It is also a time for people to make a conscious choice about how they will enter the new age.

Closer to home, the Anishinaabe people of North America are describing the current moment in a similar fashion. The Anishinaabe refer to an upcoming time in which, if they choose the path of wisdom and respect, people from many different cultures will come together and build the eighth fire of justice and harmony.

Throughout the Americas, Indigenous peoples have faced centuries of oppression and discrimination marked by episodes of massacre and genocide, including cultural genocide through assimilation policies. In some countries the Indigenous population was exterminated, while in others, as a survival strategy, many Indigenous people have stopped identifying as such, no longer transmitting their knowledge and culture to their children and grandchildren.

Armed conflicts that raged throughout the region in the '70s, '80s and '90s exacerbated the precarious situation of Indigenous peoples, as they were often targeted by armed actors, including their own states. The consequences of the violence against Indigenous peoples and their systematic oppression are dire: poverty, health problems, struggle with identity, divisions, and continued marginalization. Nowadays, Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas are facing a new form of colonization: large-scale resource development projects on their territories without their consent.

Increasingly, Indigenous peoples have been denouncing the discrimination against them, and calling for deep structural changes. Yet these demands have often fallen on deaf ears. Inter Pares supports Indigenous peoples' efforts to make

their own voices and proposals heard, including improving the internal capacity of their organizations, and helping them link with others facing similar struggles.

In Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico, Inter Pares has prioritized supporting Indigenous women's efforts to strengthen their participation in decision-making processes. In the case of Colombia, this includes providing targeted funds that enable Indigenous women delegates to join in key meetings of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC).

And while tradition and culture have frequently been cited as reasons to justify discrimination against women within Indigenous communities, our Guatemalan counterparts, the National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA) and Kaqla, are reclaiming Indigenous culture to address and transform conditions that lead to Indigenous women's double marginalization. Both organizations are reclaiming the Mayan cosmivision – an Indigenous view of the world that links the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the whole person, while recognizing the harmonious relationship with nature – to advance women's equality and develop healing approaches for women survivors of sexual violence.

Inter Pares has also played a role fostering linkages between Indigenous organizations and other parts of broader social movements. Increasingly, non-Indigenous people and organizations are joining forces with the Indigenous movements in the Americas, recognizing that the struggle for Mother Earth brings us all together to denounce the aggressive models of resource development being imposed undemocratically upon communities. For instance, in October 2011, 15,000 Colombians from diverse backgrounds – Indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, small-scale farmers, and workers' organizations – attended the first Congress on Land and Territories in Cali, Colombia. Over the course of a few days, they worked side by side to build a common agenda; at the end of the Congress, they declared: "Because this land is ours, territories are of the peoples. Mother Earth belongs to those who look after her."

As the Anishinaabe and Mayan peoples prepare for a new world age, the choice remains for all of us: will we help build a more just future? ☞

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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